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Preparations for the special session of the General Assembly entitled "World Summit for Social Development and beyond: achieving social development for all in a globalizing world"

Assessing the social impact of economic measures taken in response to financial crises in developing countries

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In paragraph 1 (c) of the annex to its decision 1,[1] adopted at its first session, the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and Further Initiatives, requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its second session on the undertaking of social impact assessments utilizing comparative methodology of economic measures implemented by developing countries in the aftermath of financial crises, taking into account experiences gained from past crises in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

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In response to that request, the present report analyses the scope for using social impact assessments to better understand and to mitigate the negative social impacts of financial crises. In addition, this report explores how social impact assessment can be used to better target social programmes in response to financial crises. Rapid social appraisal and participatory impact assessment techniques are also discussed as means to ensure better ownership and therefore the effectiveness of the social policies adopted, including those implemented in the wake of financial crises. Finally, the report proposes concrete initiatives that can be taken to improve the effectiveness of social impact assessments as well as their wider adoption as an integral element of social development.

1 See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 45* (A/54/45 and Corr.1), chap. VI, sect. B.

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Introduction

1. The critical importance of social assessment was underlined by the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development[1] which stated that an integrated socio-economic approach to development required, *inter alia*, analysing and reviewing macroeconomic, microeconomic and sectoral policies and their impact on poverty, employment, social integration and social development (para. 83 (a)); assessing the extent, distribution and characteristics of poverty, unemployment, social tensions, and social exclusion (para. 83 (c)); developing quantitative and qualitative indicators of social development, including, where possible, disaggregation by gender, to assess poverty, employment, social integration and other social factors, to monitor the impact of social policies and programmes, and to find ways to improve the effectiveness of policies and programmes and introduce new programmes (para. 83 (h)); and regularly assessing national progress towards implementing the outcome of the Summit, possibly in the form of periodic national reports, outlining successes, problems and obstacles. Such reports could be considered within the framework of an appropriate consolidated reporting system, taking into account the different reporting procedures in the economic, social and environmental fields (para. 83 (j)).

2. In regard to structural adjustment, the Programme of Action also advised Governments to review the impact of structural adjustment programmes on social development by means of gender-sensitive social-impact assessments and other relevant methods (para. 91 (b)).

I. Concepts used

3. Social assessment consists of a set of methods and instruments that can be employed by planners and policy makers to assess the impact of social, economic and other public policies on specific groups within society or on specific social parameters such as incidence and depth of poverty, or employment and unemployment. When used in conjunction with social policies, programmes or projects, social assessment can help ensure that their intended positive impact on people's lives is realized and optimized, and that their negative impacts are kept to a minimum.

4. Although the present report will focus largely on the social impact of social programmes and policies, social impact assessment can also be applied to the social impact of economic and financial policies. In the case of domestic economic policies, such impact assessment can contribute to the national debate on economic policies and to their eventual modification in order to produce more positive social effects. In the case of global economic policies as well as of financial crises and economic shocks, social impact assessment can contribute to mitigating negative social impacts and developing compensatory social programmes. However, more importantly, better understanding of the social impact of financial crisis can help raise awareness and eventually help redirect the global policies and financial architecture that contributed to such crises or shocks in the first place.

5. While such an application is largely outside the scope of this report, the notion of social impact assessment can also be extended to assess the economic impact of social policies. Social policies and programmes (including areas of social protection, application of labour standards, investments in health, education and basic social services) have economic impacts that may be neglected or underestimated by policy makers. Social policies can have a positive impact on the productivity of the workforce and therefore contribute to increased output and to improved competitiveness and profitability of enterprises. Therefore, social impact assessment should include capabilities to monitor such economic and financial impacts of social policy.

6. Social impact assessment, to be effective, must have a participatory dimension. The participatory process involves stakeholders, particularly the intended beneficiaries of social policies and programmes, in identifying their own problems and in contributing to the design of the solutions to these problems.

7. Social impact assessment can be undertaken at all stages of an intervention, but it is at its most useful before and during implementation. In the policy formulation stage, social assessment helps identify intended beneficiaries and their need for the specific intervention under consideration. It verifies whether other, perhaps more needy groups are excluded and estimates the negative impact that it can have on still other groups. It considers gender balance and the participation of stakeholders. During implementation, it ensures that the target groups are correctly identified

and helps ensure that they indeed remain the focus of interventions. It also contributes to monitoring change and to verifying that policies are achieving the intended impact.

8. In sum, social assessment can contribute, *inter alia*, to the following aims:

- To forecast *before* and evaluate *during* implementation the social impact of policies, programmes and projects;
- To assess what factors could improve the response of the poor to new incentives for raising their productivity and income;
- To analyse the poverty-reduction and employment content of public investment policies and expenditure reviews;
- To design social protection systems with particular reference to the poor, addressing periodic vulnerability;
- To strengthen the ownership of programmes by participatory processes that involve beneficiaries, government, civil society and other relevant actors.

9. Social impact is measured by absolute and relative changes in the standards of living of individuals or households. Absolute changes are an indication of the progress of individuals and households in the satisfaction of basic needs relative to a socially acceptable minimum. Relative changes refer to the different speeds at which the standards of living among individuals or households change in a given society. Relative changes in living standards are important because they measure social integration. Also, it is especially important to monitor relative changes in income of different social groups during financial crises or in the context of external shocks. In the case of the East Asian financial crisis, the sudden downturn of incomes for groups that had worked their way out of poverty and become accustomed to decades of uninterrupted progress, contributed to social instability and a breakdown of mechanisms for social integration. Perceptions of progress or regress, as a complement to data on absolute levels of income poverty, are particularly important elements of social impact assessment. Social well-being results not only from individuals' and households' satisfying their basic needs but also from such groups' perceiving themselves to be an integral part of society.

10. Indicators of social impact would typically be those measuring employment, absolute and relative income, and levels of education, health, housing and other social services, as well as indicators of social integration. Several lists of such indicators have been proposed by the United Nations as well as by other international organizations.[2] The issue of social impact assessment cannot be seen in isolation from the issue of the indicators that will be used to measure this impact.

II. Recent financial crises

11. The years following Copenhagen have been troubled by severe financial crisis, beginning with Thailand in July 1997, spreading elsewhere within Asia, particularly to Indonesia and the Republic of Korea, and then continuing with the Russian Federation in mid-1998, with Brazil closing the cycle later in the same year.

12. Although each crisis had its distinct precursors and trigger mechanisms, those precursors were, in general, high short-term debt relative to gross domestic product (GDP),[3] and decreasing productivity gains.[4] The sudden and snowballing loss of confidence of investors in the capacity of these countries to honour their debts and their rush to recover their capital were the immediate causes of the crises.[5] National currencies were sharply devaluated, interest rates were raised rapidly and the price of basic commodities escalated.

13. The cumulative impact of these monetary changes was serious economic contraction. Responding to the first symptoms of the crisis, commercial banks froze credit lines, pushing companies to cut down on production, reduce their labour force and sell assets to remain solvent. The potential for expanding exports as a result of the devaluation could not be realized immediately owing to reduced availability of credit. The crisis was further exacerbated by cutbacks in government expenditures,[6] although the three Asian countries most affected by the crises already had comparatively low levels of public expenditures relative to GDP.[7] As the crisis deepened, projected growth of output was revised downwards.

14. The financial crises have had a major impact on the social situation. The contraction of economic activity increased unemployment and underemployment and eroded household incomes.

Budget retrenchment and smaller social expenditures decreased access to social services. However, the social dislocation caused by the crisis is likely to have longer-term effects on social structures and the polity as well. Long after the economic crisis has been overcome, these effects are likely to be felt. The informal social assistance that families and households extended to their members in need was weakened, perhaps irrevocably, when the crisis outlasted the capacity of households to provide such support.

15. The impact of the crisis was made more severe by the fact that the countries concerned did not possess comprehensive systems of social protection, labour standards, active labour-market policies and balanced industrial relations. Either social protection systems were not created at all, or they were not fully operational at the time of the crisis. In any event, given the decades-long period of sustained full employment, many Asian developing countries had seen little urgency in establishing comprehensive systems of social protection. In the case of the formerly centrally planned economies, social protection had been largely supplied by the State enterprises in a regime of full employment. With the dissolution of the State industrial sector in the early years of the economic reform process, long before the crisis of 1998, such systems had been either reduced or abandoned as too expensive.

16. Also, in many of the affected countries, trade union movements were weak, had been discouraged for decades, or were undermined by the crisis in the industrial sector or by their association with past regimes. As a consequence, the social effects of the crisis were often passed on to the workers, without the countervailing influence of labour organizations.

17. The social situation was further worsened by the reduction in public expenditures required to meet budget deficit parameters agreed with multilateral financial institutions. Although social expenditures were to some extent protected against cuts across the board, reductions were unavoidable. Scattered evidence from micro-studies indicates that the crisis and the more limited availability of public services have reduced the access of the poor to these services, thereby negatively affecting the education and health situation of the population.

III. The scope for social impact assessment

A. Social impact assessment and financial crises

18. The crisis took the international business and economic policy communities by surprise. Few suspected that the Asian emerging economies, whose policies they had held up as models to the rest of the world, were about to suffer an economic crisis of such magnitude.[8]

19. The crisis also caught policy makers unprepared to address its social consequences. It was not immediately clear where the damage had been inflicted, how severe it was, and which groups suffered most. During the early days of the Asian crisis, data on its social impact were incomplete and incorrect and the capacity to collect them was weak. Because of the swiftness with which the crisis developed, long-term statistical series on poverty and social development were of little or no use in filling the information gap.

20. As a consequence, interventions were seldom effective. Emergency income maintenance programmes to provide employment and protect the vulnerable could not be started at short notice. When they finally were, it was later discovered that they had not benefited the areas that needed them most. The relevant offices of the public administration and organizations of civil society were unprepared to identify needs accurately, and to formulate and carry out projects to meet those needs on short notice. While several programmes were launched, often with external financial support, they were not always correctly targeted.

21. It is evident that a severe and sudden decline in the national product will have painful social effects. While better social impact assessment capability could not have averted the painful negative effects of the crisis altogether, a greater knowledge of how income losses would be distributed and an institutional capability to assess needs quickly and to set up emergency social assistance programmes could have helped alleviate the impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable groups.

22. Therefore, the case can be made for creating, alongside the process of reforming the world financial architecture to avoid the recurrence of crises of this

magnitude, institutional mechanisms to manage the social impacts of financial crises. In this context, the recommendation of the Social Summit that social concerns be taken into account while formulating economic programmes becomes particularly relevant. In fact, better management of the social impacts of financial crises can be seen as a stepping stone towards one of the larger objectives of the Social Summit in the context of the processes of globalization, namely, how to manage these processes and threats so as to enhance their benefits and mitigate their negative impacts upon people (see Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development,[9] para. 14).

B. Social impact assessment in the policy and project cycle

23. The application of social impact assessment in the context of financial crises should be seen in the context of its wider use in the policy and project cycle. The forecast of expected (ex ante) social impact and the ex post evaluation of actual impact of policies and programmes have been a common practice for quite some time in the framework of development cooperation. Bilateral and multilateral development agencies have made a practice of evaluating the projects that they finance.

24. However, the need for assessing the social impact of development policies has been growing in recent years both in developing and in developed countries as a result of several factors. One factor is a corollary of the shrinking role of the State in economic management. Decisions that shape the lives of millions of people are increasingly made by economic and financial actors, whose national affiliation has become increasingly blurred, and matters little in their decisions. Much as it may withdraw from economic planning and production, decentralize to lower administrative levels or devolve to private entities the management of its services, the State has the duty to ensure the welfare of its citizens. In order to promote its citizens' welfare, the State has a responsibility to either prevent or mitigate the negative social impact arising from economic policies, often deriving from the decisions of a myriad of economic actors. Social impact assessment methodologies and capacity acquire particular importance in strengthening Governments' ability to fulfil these responsibilities. In countries where representative democracy, and its corollary institutions, the free press, and a free and civil society, are still weak, there is an even stronger need to strengthen social impact assessments and national capacities to carry them out.

25. In the context of policy and programme design, targeting is an area where the need for social assessment has been growing in recent years. The State must ensure that the fewer resources it redistributes reach those who need them most. While there is debate on the respective merits of targeted versus universal services, there is no doubt that certain types of services, particularly social assistance involving cash transfers, require targeting beneficiaries on the basis of their needs. Social assessment, by frequently monitoring the conditions of beneficiaries, can improve targeting, at the same time as it evaluates programme impact and therefore seeks to improve the quality of services.

26. Another factor justifying the need for social impact assessment relates to recent changes in development cooperation, as a result of the growing perception among development specialists of the complexity and multidimensionality of underdevelopment and of the failure of many national projects to produce the results expected. One discrepancy between the values of the development agencies and those of the communities concerns the meaning of poverty.[10] Social assessment studies have revealed much to the surprise of Western development practitioners, that for many in developing countries, poverty is not only, or indeed not mainly, about income. In the Indian subcontinent, for instance, interviews with rural communities pointed out that the self-described poor were not necessarily those households with lowest incomes. Rather, they were those who lacked land and a large family, and had been obliged to leave for the city, where their income might be higher than that of those who stayed behind, but less secure and earned through occupations that afforded less dignity and prestige. Similarly, recent participatory poverty assessments in Africa, carried out by the World Bank, have helped identify the priorities of the poor. For instance, these assessments underlined the key importance of water supply, of security, and of access to services, government institutions and markets.[11]

27. One critical dimension of social assessment is the reliance for information and advice on the beneficiaries of the policies and programmes assessed. Social assessment gives a voice to the communities,

households and individuals whom development policies and programmes are intended to help but whose view of the world, whose knowledge of local reality and whose intellectual capacities they very seldom tap. "The depth and breadth of stakeholder involvement was a factor both in the quality of the assessment and in its effectiveness as an influence on policy."[12] Therefore social impact assessment is important not just in providing an accurate diagnosis or evaluation of a policy intervention, but also, through its participatory nature, in ensuring ownership and therefore achieving the desired impact of the policies being designed or evaluated.

28. Stakeholder analysis is an effective instrument for social assessment. Development is a goal shared by different stakeholders: policy makers, external support agencies, national Governments, civil society and the beneficiaries themselves. Each group has its own philosophy, interest and concerns, and it is essential that these are taken into account while formulating development policies and programmes.

29. In conclusion, social assessment has gained increased relevance in recent years as a result of several factors. One is the reduced role of the State in determining economic and financial policy which nevertheless has profound social impacts. Social impact assessment is an important tool for public policy in designing measures that will mitigate negative social impacts. The reform of social welfare systems through the shift from universal to targeted benefits requires enhanced capabilities for social targeting which social impact assessment can help provide. Finally, the failure and multidimensionality of some development programmes have led to the realization that inadequate attention to local factors was a cause in some cases. By promoting popular participation, social assessment can help rectify this shortcoming.

IV. Implementing social impact assessment

Managing complex social development strategies

30. The Copenhagen Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development encouraged countries to adopt an integrated approach to development. To act upon this recommendation, Governments have been called on to draft social development strategies and set up the appropriate coordination, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Those that have done so have normally created inter-ministerial coordination committees and entrusted the statistical departments with the task of monitoring and evaluating progress in social development. At times, this work has been entrusted to social or employment observatories. Typically, this task has involved collecting data on social indicators on a regular basis and data on income or consumption poverty every two years or more through appropriate household surveys. Also, occasional targeted studies have been carried out.

31. While this information is indispensable to assessing long-term trends, it is insufficient with respect to allowing the decision makers to verify whether the strategy has had the effects desired and to correct its course if it did not produce those effects. One of the reasons is lack of timeliness, which is a major constraint on nationwide household surveys. Another problem is related to the integrated nature of social strategies. Social assessment is well adapted to addressing integrated or multisectoral policy and programme interventions since it charts impact from the point of view of the intended beneficiaries as opposed to the point of view of the agencies responsible for implementing social policy, or for delivering operational programmes.

32. However, as has been demonstrated by recent financial crises, the capacity to rapidly assess the social impact both of domestic policy interventions, and of external financial and economic shocks, is usually lacking, particularly in those countries that are most socially vulnerable to such shocks. Developing both capabilities and institutional mechanisms for social impact assessment is furthermore instrumental in monitoring progress towards the achievement of targets agreed upon during the Social Summit as well as in carrying out the ongoing review and appraisal of implementation of the Social Summit's goals.

V. Conclusions and suggestions for action

A. Conclusions

33. While an appropriate financial architecture may well have prevented the financial crisis that struck a number of Asian, Eastern European and Latin American countries in 1997 and 1998, once unchained the crisis could not fail to have a major social impact. The fall in output that it caused was of such magnitude that the employment situation and the levels of income were bound to decline, particularly in countries that lacked solid social protection legislation and a strong trade union movement.

34. Social impact assessment could have helped distribute the pain more fairly and spared the vulnerable groups the most severe forms of distress. The data needed to target the most affected groups of the population and to design emergency programmes to meet their priority needs were not available. Nor did the institutions charged with formulating these programmes have the capacity to collect these data. As a result, the emergency programmes designed in the immediate aftermath of the crisis sometimes went to the people and regions whose need was not greatest, and provided goods and services that were not necessarily in short supply.

35. The lessons learned from those crises might therefore stimulate Governments to establish capabilities for social impact assessment as critical components of overall disaster preparedness. These capabilities will be called for in the case of the recurrence of the financial crises or, indeed, of all forms of natural and man-made disasters.

36. However, social impact assessment can be used as well for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of all development policies and programmes, of which those aimed at alleviating the impact of the financial crises are a subset. This report argues that the need for capacities in this field has been growing in recent years, owing to several factors, such as:

- The reduction of the role of the State in the economy;
- The growing recourse to the implementation of social strategies and programmes;
- The implementation of economic reform packages in developing countries;
- The need to assess the social impact of recent financial crises and other external shocks;
- The need to ensure that scarce resources for social welfare go to the neediest;
- The multidisciplinary nature of development policies and programmes;
- The failure of some development programmes and projects.

B. Options for action at the national level

37. Countries at all levels of development should create capabilities for social assessment. The issue is what these skills should be, where they should be located and how to mobilize the required technical and financial assistance. While each Government will decide which approach is preferable, a few observations based on an assessment of concrete experiences are made below.

38. Looking at the likely social impact of alternative policy options should be an essential component of all policy formulation exercises. In countries undergoing structural adjustment or economic reform, the need for social impact capabilities is evident. While recent programmes have been designed to alleviate the most severe impacts of adjustment, whether or not they have done so in actual practice is uncertain. Hence, there is a need for regular, frequent monitoring and evaluation of impact. Countries that, for whatever reason, are vulnerable to financial and other man-made disasters, or to natural disasters, should strengthen their capacity for rapid social assessment in the context of the overall preparedness to such crises.

39. There is a particular need for social assessment in the context of the follow-up to the Social Summit. For most countries, the review and appraisal of progress in the achievement of the goals of the Summit will be based on statistics, although there are a few that will have to rely on other, less costly indicators and methods. The follow-up to the Social Summit requires the establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that must be based largely on social assessment methods.

40. Capabilities for social assessment should be available in institutions designed to formulate, monitor and evaluate development policies and programmes. In view of the progress of decentralization of such institutions — progress that, though halting and incomplete, is occurring in countries at all levels of development — these capabilities should be available at both the central and local levels. Local authorities are increasingly responsible for social welfare because social welfare programmes are usually the first to be decentralized.

41. While it can contribute to improving the quality of poverty estimates, social assessment does not replace formal statistical methods for nationwide measurement of changes in poverty levels. This is so unless costs are a central concern and unless capacities for formal statistical analysis are not available, as is the case, for instance, in conflict and post-conflict situations, particularly in regions directly affected by war. Social assessment should be seen as a tool in policy and programme management.

42. The issue of where to place institutional capabilities for social assessment at the central level is complex. Statistical offices are one possible choice. They exist in most countries, and have grown stronger in recent years, largely as the result of the interest of the international community in better and more abundant data on social and economic development. However, the background of social assessment specialists is more centred in social anthropology, sociology or social welfare than in statistics. The skills required are more centred in analysis than in the collection of data. The best location for social assessment capabilities would therefore appear to be in planning or finance ministries alongside the department of statistics. Smaller sections could also be created as part of the policy analysis capability in other "social" ministries, particularly those whose work has the greatest impact on the population, such as the ministry of labour or social welfare.

43. Also, in countries that have formulated a national social development strategy and have established inter-ministerial monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the capabilities for social assessment should be provided to the institutions that provide technical support to these mechanisms.

C. Options for action at the international level

44. Technical and financial assistance should be provided to developing countries and countries with economies in transition to strengthen their capabilities in social impact assessment. This is particularly urgent in the context of the follow-up to the Social Summit. Countries that do not fully possess the capabilities to report accurately on progress achieved in the implementation of the Social Summit should be assisted in complementing the information available from formal statistical sources with qualitative information from social assessment. This additional knowledge could be used to improve the quality of the information provided to the United Nations in the context of the ongoing exercise on review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development.

45. In view of the potential role of social assessment for the follow-up to the Social Summit, the necessary technical and financial assistance to developing countries and countries in transition could be provided through the United Nations Secretariat. The technical cooperation functions of the Secretariat, particularly its advisory services, could therefore be strengthened and supported in order to enable it to assist countries in developing social impact assessment capabilities.

Notes

[1] *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[2] See *Handbook on Social Indicators*, Studies in Methods, No. 49 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.89.XVII.6). See also report of the Secretary-General on a critical review of the development of indicators in the context of conference follow-up, submitted to the informal meeting on development indicators of the Economic and Social Council, New York, 10 and 11 May 1999, under the agenda item entitled "Integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up of major United Nations conferences and summits".

[3] The Republic of Korea had short-term debt three times its foreign reserves, and Indonesia and Thailand had short-term debt almost two times their foreign reserves.

[4] This, however, was not the case for Brazil, where all fundamentals were solid, and economic policies prior to

the crisis were orthodox. See Paul Krugman, "Don't blame it on Rio ... or on Brasilia either". Slate Archives, 11 February 1999 (http://slate.msn.com/Dismal/99-02-11/Dismal.asp#19111).

[5] This mistrust was only marginally indicated by economic indicators, which generally showed the three Asian countries to have been growing rapidly and consistently before the crisis.

[6] The decrease in government expenditures in Thailand was of the order of 15 per cent.

[7] In 1995, the shares of central government expenditures relative to gross domestic product (GDP) were 11 per cent, 16 per cent and 18 per cent for Thailand, Indonesia and the Republic of Korea respectively.

[8] It has been argued that the policies implemented to restore market confidence backfired, causing the crisis to deepen even further. Raising interest rates to very high levels and reducing public expenditures may have given potential investors a notion that the crisis was more severe than the facts indicated. See Eddy Lee, *The Asian Financial Crisis* (Geneva, International Labour Organization (ILO), 1998).

[9] *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

[10] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Overcoming Human Poverty: UNDP Poverty Report* (UNDP, 1998); and J. Beall and others, *Social Safety Nets and Social Networks: Their Role in Poverty Alleviation in Pakistan* (United Kingdom, University College, London, Development Planning Unit, 1994).

[11] D. Booth and others, "Participatory poverty assessment: the World Bank contribution and emerging agenda", in *Urban Poverty in Africa: From Understanding to Alleviation*, S. Jones and N. Nelson, eds. (Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999).

[12] Ibid.